INTRODUCTION

NATURE, DEATH, SIN, LAW, GRACE

Two associated aspirations, like two invisible wings, raise the human soul above the rest of created nature: the hunger for *immortality* and the thirst for *truth* or moral perfection. Either without the other is meaningless. Unless accompanied by moral perfection immortal life is not a good: man has to become worthy of that immortality by fulfilling all truth; on the other hand, a perfection that is subject to annihilation is not a true good either. Endless life without truth and perfection would be an eternity of torment, and perfection without immortality would be rank injustice and an indignity beyond measure.

But if our better part, the soul, desires eternal life and truth, the order of nature as we know it deprives us of both. Left to himself, man is able to conserve neither his life nor his moral dignity, he comes upon bodily death and spiritual death. He finds himself in the power of two closely allied enemies of the good in him, *sin* and *death*, of which the one dominates the soul and the other the body,

setting themselves up in opposition to his corresponding spiritual desires. We *want* to keep ourselves above the rest of animate nature, but it is an empty wish, for death drags us down to the level of all other earthly creatures, while sin puts us even below them. By the law of nature man's lot is to suffer and to perish, nor can the unaided law of his reason save him.

We are born and we grow up with a whole lot of inclinations and needs which we try to satisfy. That is *in accordance with nature*. But human nature is threefold, and has corresponding requirements, *animal*, *intellectual*, and *affective* or of the heart: accordingly we first of all try to *conserve* and " eternalize " our life ; then we seek by means of our reason to *understand* our life and that of others, as it were to reproduce it in the mind ; and finally we endeavour to enlarge and *improve* life, with the wish that everything that exists should be as worthy as possible of existence. First of all we have to *live*, then to *understand* life, and then to *make it right*.

The requirements of animal nature, that is, the instinct for the preservation of life, are certainly the most imperative and unarguable, for once life is lost there is nothing to understand or to improve. All the animal needs and functions can be finally reduced to two, *nourishment*, for the temporary prolonging of individual existence, and *reproduction*,

for the perpetuation of the species. The *basis* of all animal life is nourishment, its ultimate aim or *end* is reproduction: if the individual does not eat he cannot generate, and if does not generate there is no reason for him to eat; the animal's job is done when he has brought forth and raised his offspring —everything else is only a means to that end.

Each generation (and each individual that composes it) exists simply to produce the following generation, and so on; the purpose of each generation is only to be found in that which comes after it. In other words, the life of any one generation taken by itself is meaningless; but if this be so, then the life of them all is equally meaningless.

This purposeless existence is called "the life of the race." But is it truly *a life?* If the race lives only in a succession of ever-dying generations then its so-called life is simply a constant death, and nature's pattern is nothing but a cheat. The reason for each individual's existence is found in another being, in posterity, which in its turn has its object only in its descendants, and so on for ever; there is no real end or object at all—nothing but an unrealizable tendency. The human race calls for eternal life, and nature meets this world-wide aspiration with eternal death.

That is why it is nonsensical to tell a man that to satisfy his natural needs and inclinations is the

only way to happiness—because the first and fundamental need, to protect his life and live for ever, is never satisfied in the natural order. When one asks, " Why do we live ? What is the object of our life ? " and is told that life itself is its own object, that reply is equally nonsensical, for life itself is exactly what we do not find : what we do find is an urge and movement towards something else ; we find continuity and permanence only in death.

This power of death which reduces our animal life to one of purposeless vitality is not something accidental. When human understanding enlarges our experimental knowledge of our own nature to become a scientific knowledge of nature in general, we see that death rules throughout the material universe. Study of the earthly globe shows that it is not individuals alone that die : we learn from biology and geology that whole generic classes of animals and vegetables have disappeared ; astronomy leads us to the conclusion that whole worlds and systems of worlds have issued from formless matter and then decomposed into space, that this world and all the planets will revolve lifeless around a dying sun before decomposing also. And according to a current theory of physics all material phenomena are different forms of movement conditioned by the *inequality* of molecular

movement which is called warmth, and so, since warmth continually moves towards an equilibrium, the time will come when all phenomena will cease and the entire universe will be null and motionless.[1]

The life of the senses, then, has its term in their destruction by death, and our intellectual powers confirm that this apparent annihilation is a universal law: life is bankrupt.

And it is so not only because life is under the domination of death but also because of its own lack of worth. Our life is an evil as well as a deception. We want to live, yet we die, and we bring death to other beings. Though we cannot preserve life we can destroy it in others, and we do so, in order to feed ourselves; and all the time our object in so doing, the preservation of our own life, is illusory—for at any moment we may die, and die sometime we shall, however many beings we may destroy to keep us alive. Thus our instinct of preservation forces us to useless *killing*. Moreover, in nourishing himself on the bodies of others man as animal nourishes the sexual instinct which obliges him to sacrifice himself on the plea of carrying on the race. When we eat we take the life of another to sustain our own; when we beget we give our own life to

[1] It will be remembered that Solovyev was writing about 1882. He refers here to the theory of Thompson and Clausius. TR.

produce another. If by so doing we were able to give birth to *true life*, that is, to one with the strength to exist and worthy of existence, then this sacrifice of ourselves for the good of the race would be reasonable and have moral worth; but since we beget a life as uncertain and as bad as our own our abandonment to the instinct of the race is ultimately only a sort of useless *self-killing*.

Mechanical sexuality deceives man with the mirage of love, of which it is a counterfeit. Love is the inner inseparableness and consubstantial unity of two beings, while natural desire only tends towards such a unity without ever being able to reach it: that is why its consequence is a third being, exterior to either of them, foreign and sometimes hostile to both. So far as the exterior life of nature is concerned, malice and enmity are real, love is an illusion. When the heart seeks a worthy life, that is, a life of love, it has to condemn its own nature and its ways and look elsewhere —for to accept nature's laws as the *definitive* rule of life is to accept a law of killing and suicide and to put ourselves for ever under the yoke of death. Man the animal submits to such a fate in *spite of himself*, but the human heart will not do so, for it has within itself the pledge of *another and different life*.

Man is not content with holding intellectually that a life leading to death and nothingness is insufficient: his conscience tells him that it is sinful, a thing that *ought not to be*. This notion of sin, of that which ought not to be, is an exclusive characteristic of man and lies at the bottom of all our morality. While the lower animal goes whichever way his instincts push him, man can control his impulses and decide whether he will follow them or not: the animal simply *lives*, but in man there is a will to live *according to duty*. Over and above the "animal" questions: "Do I want and am I physically able to do so and so?" conscience puts to man alone the question: "*May* I do it?" Thus the call on his weak nature to cope with exterior natural obstacles is complicated by the consciousness of duty.

There is a "natural" tendency to act in spite of and against conscience. If we had nothing in us but the promptings of our sensitive nature, as the lower animals have, that inclination would be morally neither good nor bad, but simply a natural fact. If, on the other hand, we had a moral aspiration which met with no internal obstacles it would operate as a simple power innate in man, and there would still be no moral problem. But in fact there are two opposed tendencies and the resulting conflict is the subject of moral appreciation. The

voice of conscience we call *law*, and the animal impulses, in so far as they are out of accord with conscience, are *sin:* from the law came sin. "Because the law worketh wrath, for where no law is there is no transgression. . . . For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law" (*Romans* iv, 15; v, 13).

Thus does man leave the easy path of "nature" and enter on the double way of "law"; and as the one leads to bodily death so does the other lead to spiritual death. "For I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death; for sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me and by it slew me" (*id.* vii, 9-11).

When law condemns man's natural inclinations it puts nothing in their place and leaves them as strong as ever. Law looks solely at the external manifestations of human will, at sinful acts, and says, "Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not offend," and so on; law does not get rid of the root of sin, the evil tendency that leads to wicked deeds, but on the contrary wakes it up and makes it conscious. "I had not known sin but by the law; for I had not known lust except the law had said: 'Thou shalt not covet.' But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of

concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead" (*id.* vii, 7–8).

Law stops short at negation: it tells man what he may not do but is silent about what he ought to do. Even if the prohibition is given a positive form, e.g., "Help everyone who needs your help," there is still no indication of what must actually be done if the help is to be real and effective. When consciousness of moral obligation is awakened in a man a torrent of self-will is checked, but he is left helpless and alone before it; conscience *judges* nature, it tells right from wrong, but it gives no power to do the right and to overcome the wrong. "For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not: but what I hate, that I do. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of good after

the inward man, but I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. . . . So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin" (*id.* vii, 14–23, 25).

So to the natural discomfort that results from our mortal nature is added the moral suffering caused by this interior division which makes us condemn ourselves.

The whole moral difficulty lies in the fact that consciousness of what our duty is does not enable us to do it. Man's nature is warped, and the fact that he has a conscience does not alter his nature: we cannot get rid of the results of original sin. By his reason and conscience man learns of this perversion of his nature, he hates it, he denies it any good, but all this does not go beyond *thought* —and so is a falsehood, in the sense that a judgement that condemns a thing but does not know how to rectify it seems feeble, unreliable, and untrue to itself.

Effectively to modify and correct his spoiled nature man needs another real principle by which he can act, the principle of a life that is better than that of his nature as it is. He cannot himself create such a new principle, it must exist outside himself, he must *receive* it. And just as we individually did

not make the inherent weakness of our own nature but inherited it through the fault of mankind in the world, so this new and good life is given to us by Him who is above the world and better than the world. And that is why this other and *good* life, *given* to man, is called *grace*.[1]

Divine grace is a *good*, a good that is given to man and not simply thought by him. As has been said above, man's nature and his reason, which teaches him the moral law, are insufficient to bring about good in him, and so he has either to give it up altogether or else recognize that it exists outside and independently of human nature and reason, that it exists as an absolute and communicates itself to man from itself. This true good, the being which possesses in himself the fullness of good and the source of grace, is God.

We know that our natural end is death, but "the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law" (I *Cor.* xv, 56). Knowing that, we have to look beyond nature and law and find a third way, that of grace, and recognize God as the sole source of grace.

But truly to enter into the order of grace it is not enough intellectually to acknowledge the right path to it: we have to *fight* and to surpass ourselves in an interior movement of the *will*; grace, divine

[1] Latin *gratia*—favour, free gift; Russian *blagodat*—good gift. TR.

power, comes only by interior *struggle*. This spiritual warfare has three stages. First of all man has to have a loathing for evil, to know it to be sin; then he has to undertake an interior fight against it; lastly, convinced of his own insufficiency in the contest, he has to turn to God and ask his help. So in order to receive grace there are required a *reprobation* of moral evil or sin, an *effort* to get free from it, and a *turning to God* ("conversion").[1]

The *fullness of good* exists in God from eternity —otherwise he would not be the infinitely Perfect Being, he would not be God. It follows that he who desires good has not got to create it: he has only to give free access to divine grace, to surmount the obstacles and throw down the barriers which separate us and our world from real goodness and happiness. The chief of these obstacles is not found in external nature, which is passive, that is, it does not act *on its own*, and consequently it cannot without our activity separate us from God and hide his light. No; *the* obstacle is in the self-sufficient

[1] I do not say that these first steps can be taken by man without any supernatural help. Generally speaking, I do not here go into the metaphysical question of the relation between human freedom and divine action, I simply describe the process in its internal aspect, setting it out according to the evidence of *experience*, and try just to touch on the part played in it by human personality. From this point of view it cannot be questioned that grace does not act on anybody who is not interiorly turned away from sin and towards God. A *sudden* conversion such as that of Saul does not contradict this, for Saul did not persecute Christians out of malice but from a religious (though mistaken) zeal which drew down God's grace on him.

creature who wants to do as he likes and act according to his own judgement, that is, man himself. Man can not only give free rein to his animal instincts but he can, and does, act on a wrong *decision*, on a bad *principle*, a decision or principle deliberately adopted by his own will.

" The whole world lieth in wickedness " (1 *John* v, 19) and mankind itself is no better, for " There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God " (*Rom.* iii, 10–11). Every time a man does anything by his own powers alone or lets himself be impelled by that world which lieth in wickedness he separates himself and the world still further from God. All human acts arise from the will: thus it is the will of man that keeps him from the true good, which is God. But by this same will man can decide not to please himself or the world: he can resolve that "*I don't want to have my own way.*" That renouncement and conversion of his will is man's supreme victory, because in it *he himself* abdicates voluntarily, renouncing his own will *by* his own will. The human will cannot be forced: a man may be driven by fear or violence to do a wicked deed but he cannot be driven to have a wicked will, for the will is independent of external force; in the same way it is only of his own volition that man can turn his will from evil

towards the only good. Faith in God is a mysterious reciprocal bond between the Godhead and the human soul which requires the direct participation of the human will: without an act of will we cannot believe in God. If we don't want to believe, then we shall not believe: God does not will to be an external fact *forcing himself upon us*, but an interior truth whom we are *morally obliged* freely to recognize. To believe in God is a moral *duty:* if man does not fulfil his moral duty then he of necessity loses his moral dignity.

To believe in God is to recognize the existence of that good which conscience attests, which we seek in our life, but which neither nature nor reason gives us; it is to see that this good *exists*, but outside us and in itself. But for this faith we should have to conclude that good is only a deceiving emotion or an arbitrary idea, that, in fact, it does not really exist at all. But this we cannot morally admit, for our moral existence, our whole life, has meaning only in as much as we believe in a real good, *a good considered as truth*. We must, then, believe that good exists in itself, and that it is the one truth: *we must believe in God*. This faith is both a divine gift and our own free act.